

**DATING CLINTON:
MEMOIRS OF THE CLINTON ERA
*REVIEW ESSAY***

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ABSTRACT

During and subsequent to the Clinton presidency, the potent and personal metaphors of seduction and dating have been frequently evoked by commentators, biographers and memoirists to capture the President's relationship with his advisers, staff, supporters, the media, and the American people. In this article, I examine why analysis of Clinton has been so personalized and visceral; I then place the reactions of commentators into three categories: supporters (the seduced), the disappointed (the jilted), and the critics (the disgusted). I argue that although this highly personalized commentary clearly has limitations and weaknesses, it remains a distinct feature of the Clinton era.

The political scientist Stephen Wayne has written that when historians look back on the Clinton presidency, they will be more fascinated by the Clinton persona than by the accomplishments and failures of his administration, his policies, or his impeachment [1]. If Wayne's prophecy is even partially correct, the Clinton persona is likely to be the source of considerable academic inquiry. These investigations will not be able to ignore the memoirs of those who felt personally touched or disgusted by Clinton during his presidency. As a result the "kiss-and-tell" or more often than not the "hiss-and-tell" memoirs of the Clinton era are likely to have a longer currency than is the norm for such books because studies of Clinton will tend to have a more personal focus than is usual. The memoirs discussed here include the accounts of those who were close at hand in the White House or the cabinet room, and those who observed from the press galleries. All of these books are more personal than analytical and all illustrate the impact the Clinton persona had on others. This impact is vividly recounted in the words of political theorist Benjamin Barber who writes like a star-struck intern and in those of former political aide turned ABC television host, George Stephanopoulos, whose complaints about Clinton make him sound like a jilted lover.

My own interest in these memoirs is that these highly subjective accounts (and in fact often petulant retellings) are important material for Clinton scholars. I am intrigued by the paradox that the very material we need to better understand the Clinton persona is essentially unreliable, or at least in the traditional sense unscholarly. Even while these accounts claim to

set the record straight, their petulance, emotionality and personalization makes us feel they are not particularly trustworthy. This being the case, I have drawn guidance from Charles O. Jones, who when writing on the Reagan era memoirs summarized this problem as “mistrust but verify” [2].

Recognizing the centrality of the Clinton persona in any examination of the Clinton presidency, a number of obvious questions arise that I will examine in this review. Firstly, was there something unique about Clinton’s personality, character and private life that attracted attention and scrutiny? Secondly, what was it about Clinton that so infuriated his enemies? Thirdly, was this personalization more a factor of the era in which Clinton served (wealthy and frivolous times before politics got serious again in the twenty-first century) than the man himself? To examine these issues I will start by setting these works in the undeniably personalized context of the 1990s. I then place the Clinton memoirists into three categories.

OF THE MAN AND HIS TIMES

The Clinton presidency highlights many of the challenges facing modern American democratic leaders. How can such leaders be the focal point for their nation while maintaining some privacy? How can they harness the media to reach disengaged constituents without inviting media politics to become even more callow and celebrity-driven than it already is? In many regards Clinton was a remarkably versatile democratic leader who embraced and understood both the cult of the presidency and the media culture of his age. However, while his ebullient personality was his most striking talent and a magnet for his supporters, Clinton’s style also clearly infuriated a hard core of opponents who were drawn regularly to attack the man himself while often ignoring his generally rather moderate policies [3]. From the beginnings of his presidency, reactions to Clinton were remarkably personal with a constant focus on both his personal appeal and personal history. Events within the Clinton White House, most notably his relationship with Monica Lewinsky, further exacerbated this trend creating the most personalized presidency in US history.

Although Bill Clinton’s style was certainly quite a departure from that of Presidents Ronald Reagan and George H. W. Bush it would be wrong to claim that the personalized nature of the Clinton commentary was entirely of his making; it also reflected the media politics of the times. The relationship is thus best seen as symbiotic. Clinton did his share of harnessing the media but he was also often the one being harnessed. Existing tendencies to personalize and trivialize politicians were taken to a further extreme during the Clinton presidency. Furthermore, this personalization was often bitter and very negative. The literature examined here, like the media commentary of the time, mirrors these trends.

Personal attacks of course have long been a part of presidential politics [4]. As Conason and Lyons write: “What President Clinton has aptly termed ‘the politics of personal destruction’ is merely a new name for a very old phenomenon” [5]. However, while Clinton’s behavior may have invited speculation and later investigation, it has often been noted that the behavior he was scrutinized so intensely over was probably no more scandalous than that of many earlier presidents [6]. What changed during the Clinton presidency was not the behavior of politicians, but the level and breadth of investigation and disclosure by the media and by official investigators. In the words of Conason and Lyons again:

No president of the United States and no first lady have ever been subject to the corrosive combination of personal scrutiny, published and broadcast vilification, and official investigation and prosecution endured by William Jefferson Clinton and Hillary Rodham Clinton [7].

Those who argue Clinton was a victim of the media style of his time in office can fairly claim that mainstream entertainment during the 1990s became notably more voyeuristic with its interest in the sexual lives of celebrities and “wannabe” celebrities. Clinton watching can be seen as part of this shift. From actors to royals, to total strangers on reality TV shows, the late twentieth century saw sex and personal “scandals” used more than ever to sell music, advertised products, and entertainment in general. Current affairs media joined the trend, becoming more infotainment-driven, with gossipy talk show hosts and Internet journalists able to command as much attention as traditional media outlets. In this environment the *New York Times* employed op-ed columnists, such as Maureen Dowd and Frank Rich, who wrote more like the society and style columnists of a previous era than traditional political journalists. The result was often a more garrulous and intrusive media culture that tended to care less about the rights of politicians to privacy.

The personalized coverage that typified Clinton’s presidency was not solely the result of media opportunism and the search for titillation however; some other very strange bedfellows contributed to the demise of privacy in late twentieth century US politics. Feminists had for some time been questioning the public/private divide, suggesting it not only privileged traditional male work environments but helped protect men from having their private behavior questioned. These feminist concerns were brought clearly to the attention of mainstream politics with the Clarence Thomas Supreme Court confirmation hearings where feminist organizations like the National Organization for Women (NOW) played an important role in organizing the anti-Thomas campaign. The Thomas hearings were covered in such detail by the media that the public knew his taste in video rentals. A growing disregard for privacy was also evident in the 1987 media expose of Gary Hart’s extramarital affair. The rights of politicians to personal privacy was further eroded during the Clinton era with the once greatest defenders of the private/public divide, “family values” conservatives, becoming the most strident dissectors of Clinton’s personal life. They defended their stance by claiming that Clinton’s misdeeds made him a poor role model for America’s youth [8]. These trends all intersected in the series of sexual harassment legal cases that delved deeply into President Clinton’s private life.

The Clinton presidency also came at a time when personal scandal mongering was gaining ground as a commonplace tactic to undermine political opponents. Throughout two presidential campaigns and during the course of Clinton’s presidency, the Republican Party seemed fixated with questioning Clinton’s character and personal ethics. Public inquiry after public inquiry pursued the politics of character assassination [9]. Much of this was a case in point of what Ginsberg and Shefter call “politics by other means” [10]. Pushed to extremes by Newt Gingrich, the emergence of this tactic was facilitated and probably enhanced by general media apathy about traditional legislative politics [11]. The memoirs examined here provide examples of all of these trends and importantly remind us that this personalization has both liberal and conservative roots and is evident among Clinton supporters and haters alike.

THREE WAYS OF SEEING BILL

I examine the personalized nature of the Clinton memoirs by dividing their authors into three categories: “the seduced”, “the jilted” and “the disgusted”. These labels deliberately reflect the highly personalized language and style of much of the work on Clinton, but I hasten to say this is certainly not the first time the metaphor of romance has been used to describe the relationship of both admirers and detractors with President Clinton. Gary Wills summarized this tendency in early 1997 when he wrote:

Joe Klein was the first to make a serious case for a politics of Clinton’s jilted lovers. In his *Newsweek* column, he located sexual and ideological licentiousness, with suitable qualifications, on a single spectrum. Others have taken up the theme. Sam Smith, the editor of *Progressive Review*, wrote: “Clinton often seems a political Don Juan whose serial affairs with economic and social programs share only the transitory passion he exhibits on their behalf.” A cartoon on the cover of *The New Republic* presents Clinton as the seducer of the Statue of Liberty. David Brock, the author of “The Seduction of Hillary Rodham,” says that Clinton continues to seduce his own wife – away from her principles, toward his amorality [12].

My three categories work in the following fashion:

1. The Supporters (“the seduced”): those drawn to Clinton because of his charisma and personal talents. In the literature, supporters of Clinton have been so frequently referred to as the seduced that this outlook needs to be fully acknowledged and analyzed.
2. The Disappointed (“the jilted”): typically those who were enthusiastic about Clinton at one time but later saw him as untrustworthy or likely to back flip on policy commitments. They begin as supporters but end up disappointed.
3. The Critics (“the disgusted”): those suspicious of Clinton from the beginning. While “the seduced” and “the jilted” have regularly been named, I have added this category to the list. Generally from the more conservative side of US politics, “the disgusted” saw Clinton from the beginning of his run for the presidency as “Slick Willie” — the seducer of innocents and the enemy of proper American values.

THE SUPPORTERS (“THE SEDUCED”)

Those glad to see the end of twelve years of Republican executive governments initially swelled Clinton’s intellectual supporters. Most of these early supporters were drawn to his personal talents; in his 1998 biography *High Hopes*, Stanley Renshon sums up Clinton’s appeal thus:

Bill Clinton began his administration with the capabilities, skills, and experience to be counted among our best presidents. Intelligent, informed, exceptionally articulate, and clearly capable of communicating a vision, he seems to possess all that is needed to find a common

ground among Americans and in so doing reduce public anxiety and conflict by serving as a point of reference for diverse views [13].

While much of this enthusiasm and optimism was probably rather unrealistic, it does reveal much not only about Clinton's appeal and charisma, but also about the neediness and judgments of many of his supporters. Reflecting on this point, Roger Morris wrote that rather than judging the Clintons on their historical record, people tended to see what they wanted to in both the president and his wife [14].

Once President Clinton's supporters began to question what he really stood for and specifically what policies he would stand firmly behind, cracks emerged. Even during his first term, his closest supporters and aides began to question his ability to stay true to policy promises. Aides and administration colleagues James Carville, Paul Begala, George Stephanopoulos, Peter Edelman, Robert Reich, and Stanley Greenberg asked such questions in a range of interviews and frustrated recollections [15]. There were also concerns that the policy agenda was knocked off course by Clinton's risky personal behavior. However the truly seduced accepted Clinton's logic on the various policy reversals and the honesty of his denials on the personal front. Like the smitten everywhere they often failed to maintain their professional judgment. The best example of how the Clinton charm affected a scholar's assessment of the president is Benjamin Barber's memoir of his meetings in the Clinton White House as an outside expert and consultant. Barber is the type of person the White House occasionally called upon to attend workshops on where America was heading or for advice regarding the writing of a state of the union address – in other words, a flattering bit part. Barber did not cope entirely well with this flattery and launched into print with an at times gushy memoir. It is worth remembering before I quote from the memoir that Barber was a long-time professor of philosophy and author of the widely discussed *Jihad vs McWorld*.

In his memoir *The Truth of Power: Intellectual Affairs in the Clinton White House* Barber writes of his "affair" with Clinton and his dreams of the president. Barber shares with us these reflections:

the metaphor of seduction seemed to operate everywhere in the Clinton modus operandi; and because it worked so well as metaphor – I too felt "seduced" I too was having an "affair" with the president – the obvious fact that with Monica it was more than metaphor eluded me...[16].

As a result of these feelings Barber seems open to believe almost all of Clinton's denials until his final *mea culpa* and willing to put a positive spin on Clinton's handling of most issues. Barber's memoir of his days dreaming about and visiting the White House is the obvious archetype for my first category. He calls himself a "Clinton supporter, Clinton seducee" [17]. His language is at the extreme end of the Clinton commentaries, but this type of highly personalized reaction to Clinton is so commonplace that it makes my headings descriptive rather than mischievous. Eventually even Barber's enthusiasm is tempered and to describe this he calls upon dating metaphors:

No one hates like a seducee, once he has extricated himself from the embrace. He reviles the lingering springtime touch because he has given himself to it so ardently. No wonder Newt Gingrich would warn his allies not to allow themselves to spend personal time with the

president, and if they had to be with him, not to make any decision until a decent interval had elapsed [18].

THE DISAPPOINTED (“THE JILTED”)

As the Clinton presidency lurched from one scandal to the next, or from one policy back down to the next, the early enthusiasm many liberal commentators expressed began to fade. Although comfortable with liberal cultural settings such as MTV or his 1992 campaign appearance with gay rights activists, Clinton also sought to tame conservative family values expectations in a number of ways. These included his famous 1992 appearance with Hillary on *60 Minutes*, his signing of the Defense of Marriage Act (outlawing same-sex marriages) and his signing of the 1996 welfare reform laws which squarely promoted marriage over government dependency as a welfare solution [19]. As Clinton soothed the mainstream voters he increasingly infuriated the political class. Not surprisingly liberals and conservatives alike claimed hypocrisy. As a result, many members of my first category shifted from the first category of “seduced” to the “jilted”, a category whose members felt Clinton had failed to live up to his political potential or policy promises.

If Barber presents as almost a caricature of “the seduced” memoirist of the Clinton presidency, George Stephanopoulos is the archetype of “the jilted” memoirist. This young adviser and one time West Wing sounding board for Clinton is highly critical of the president in his memoir. In the prologue of Stephanopoulos’s *All too Human* [20] he asserts: “As I wrote and rewrote, I came to see how Clinton’s shamelessness is a key to his political success” [21]. When asked by *Newsweek* magazine if he was proud to have worked for Clinton, Stephanopoulos replied: “If I knew everything then that I know now of course I wouldn’t [have worked for him] ... I don’t think he’d be fit enough to be elected” [22]. Similarly former communications director Dee Dee Myers has written that she too would not have wanted to work for Clinton and goes as far as to describe his relationship with Monica Lewinsky as “so reckless as to seem pathological” [23]. These reactions are more directed at Clinton the man rather than his policies. Furthermore, these outpourings came directly after the Lewinsky revelations.

Robert Reich’s *Locked in the Cabinet* expresses disappointment at a policy level, particularly regarding Clinton’s decision to sign the 1996 welfare reforms. In his memoir Reich recalls how he felt sick to the stomach when Clinton announced his decision to sign the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act (PRWORA) in a July 1996 cabinet meeting. Reich angrily writes:

There is no point winning reelection if it has to be done this way. Sure two terms automatically earns you a chapter in American history books, and a decade is named after you. Win reelection and you’re considered to be among America’s successful Presidents, as long as you don’t screw up. But none of this is enough to justify hurting vulnerable people. None of it is worth the price of a million more children in poverty [24].

With similar frustration, Reich writes about how Clinton’s eyes would glaze over when Reich gave his standard speech about how the gap between America’s rich and poor was widening to an unhealthy degree. All this said however, Reich was still tempted by Clinton to

stay on for a second term after spending time with Clinton during the 1996 Democratic Party convention. He acknowledges Clinton's enduring charisma even though he has been disappointed once too often. While liberals like Reich and Stephanopoulos frequently acknowledged Clinton's political skills, ultimately he emerges from the pages of their memoirs as a talented underachiever who disappointed them with his policy decisions and reform failures.

At the extreme end of "the jilted" category is Christopher Hitchens. Never shy to personalize his critiques of Clinton, [25] Hitchens is the acerbic columnist who played a minor role in Clinton's Senate trial when he provided evidence that his former friend and then Clinton adviser Sidney Blumenthal had perjured himself and obstructed justice by spreading the "Monica as stalker story" and then denying it. Hitchens could be simply considered one of "the disgusted" except that his writings, including his *No One Left to Lie To*, reveal a degree of disappointment about Clinton. Hitchens is bitter at Clinton for drawing on the idealism of the 1960s for utterly vacuous and self-serving ends and portrays Clinton as the ultimate baby-boomer sell out. Hitchens doggedly pursues Clinton's hypocrisies such as his dismissal of the Surgeon General Jocelyn Elders for her suggestion that masturbation needed to be talked about in high school sex education. While there is no doubt that Clinton's hypocrisies were many, the invective of Hitchens is in the end too moralistic to prove engaging, smacking as it does of both the politically correct left and the puritanical right, where opponents are not only attacked for being wrong but also need to be proved to be immoral.

THE CRITICS ("THE DISGUSTED")

Clinton hating is a well-practiced sport in America, particularly on the right [26]. There are a number of explanations for why this more visceral hatred of Clinton was so noticeable compared to attitudes toward George H. W. Bush. The first explanation is that the Republicans failed to recognize the legitimacy of a Democrat president after 12 years of Republican presidents. This is Clinton's own take on why he was so hostilely received in Washington D.C. [27]. A second explanation is that Clinton's opponents were constantly frustrated by his ability to succeed despite behavior so personally risky it would have led to the downfall of most politicians. They were frustrated by both Clinton's slipperiness and their own inability to defeat an obviously flawed character, as highlighted by Conason and Lyons in their accounts of the anti-Clinton networks. Clinton is not the first politician who has been disliked for succeeding despite what are seen by opponents as obvious flaws. Richard Nixon springs to mind. As with Clinton, the sheer audacity of Nixon's success in the face of scandals seems to invite a particular breed of hatred among opponents. A third explanation for the personalized disgust is that Clinton reduced the ideological differences between the two parties. This encroachment theory has been put forward by Stephen Skowronek who argues "third way" presidents (i.e. those who have appropriated significant parts of their opposition's agenda such as Woodrow Wilson, Richard Nixon and Bill Clinton) have been judged as "moral degenerates, congenitally incapable of rising above nihilism and manipulation." Theodore Roosevelt displayed such disgust toward Woodrow Wilson and "mercilessly derided Wilson's adroit, unscrupulous cunning, his pandering to those who love ease ... his readiness to about face ... his lack of all conviction and willingness to follow

every gust of opinion” [28]. This line of thought argues that, in the absence of ideological and policy debate that could provide differentiation, right-wing critics resorted to personal attacks [29].

Ambrose Evans-Pritchard and R. Emmett Tyrrell Jr. in their respective books *The Secret Life of Bill Clinton* and *Boy Clinton* write the archetypical “disgusted” memoirs. The line between memoir and biography here is blurred. These books purport to be biographical studies, but the personal animosity they show toward Clinton makes them more memoirs of the anti-Clinton network than biographies of the man himself. Drawing on a range of interviews and rumors, both books argue that Clinton’s ambitions, desires, and lack of principles drew him into the Arkansas underworld and corrupt behavior. Their claims reiterate stories common in the anti-Clinton networks and published in the *American Spectator* magazine of which Tyrrell was a regular contributor and chairman of the editorial board. These two books provide insight into why Clinton so outraged and frustrated conservative activists and commentators; they also illustrate how the American right overreached in its personal pursuit of Clinton. With so many accusations being made about Clinton’s personal life, particularly his so called sexual misdemeanors, the public ultimately caught scandal fatigue. At the crucial time of his impeachment proceedings, it was this fatigue that saved Clinton in the court of public opinion and gave the Democrats in Congress the confidence to vote almost entirely as a party bloc against the articles of impeachment.

CONCLUSION

Where do these accounts of Clinton leave us? The personalized politics of the Clinton era can be seen as reflective of the post-cold war politics of prosperity and complacency that existed before the events of September 11, 2001 jarred political life into a much more serious mode. This outlook, although overly simplistic, is likely to be popular in years to come. Undoubtedly the politics of the 1990s established a new post-World War II highpoint for both the personalization and trivialization of politics. Furthermore, Clinton’s personality and behavior invited a false intimacy. An alternative to the highly personalized and reactive style of the memoirs examined in this article is Fred Greenstein’s work on analyzing presidential attributes, as outlined in his *The Presidential Difference* (2000). However while Greenstein’s sober analysis of presidential performance takes a much more rational approach, future analysis cannot ignore the visceral impact the Clinton persona had on others. Thus even the most scholarly work on the Clinton presidency will find it necessary to draw on and interpret the memoirs discussed in this review.

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